

# John McDermott's Celtic Charisma

He wants fans to feel he's approachable – the kind of guy you'd want to hang out with.

By Liz Grogan

**I**t was a dark and stormy night in Peterborough, Ont. Rain fell in torrents, but the crowd at the outdoor bandshell lingered on, wet and wilted, drinking in the ballads of tenor John McDermott and his merry backup band, who remained dry through most of the performance. But on one occasion during this concert last August, the wind shifted, driving the rain onto the stage. McDermott grabbed a large plastic bag to try to shield Brigham Phillips' piano and prevent the music from sailing away. Phillips responded with a tinkling of "Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head." That set the tone for the night. The audience loved it.

I had not seen John for several years. We first met in 1993, during a Kinsmen "Telamiracle Telethon" in Saskatoon. I had had the privilege of co-hosting the telethon for many years but this was John's first experience. Everyone loved this new kid on the block – his boyish, playful personality and sincerity were captivating and no one would ever forget the way he poured his heart out singing "Danny Boy."

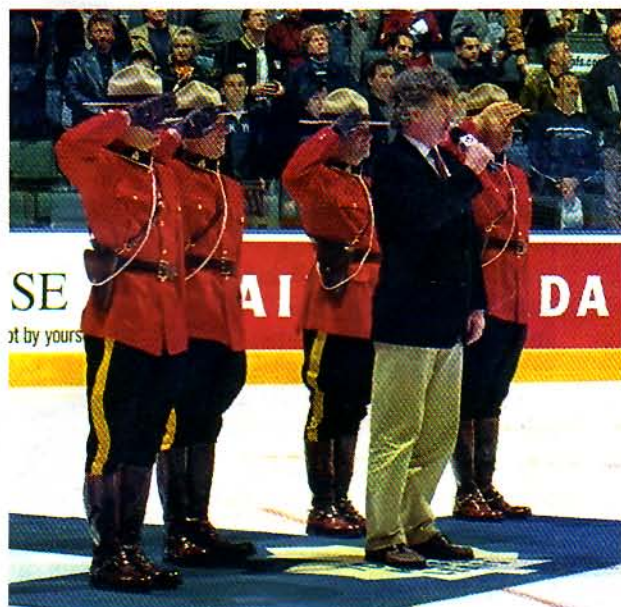
Now, 12 years later in Peterborough, this wild and wet audience

rose up on their soggy sandals and brought him back for an encore. The song, to my delight, was "Danny Boy." Once again, there wasn't a dry eye in the crowd – and it had nothing to do with the rain!

It was amazing – nearly everyone in the audience of about 10,000 stayed on, despite the relentless rain. As everyone left the show all huddled together, I met Lynne and David Huston of Lindsay, Ont., who had seen McDermott perform eight times. David commented, "He's a great singer, great entertainer and I think he would be a great friend."

And that's the impression John wants his fans to have. He wants people to feel like they're hanging out with him. He wants fans to feel that he's approachable and easy to talk to, the kind of guy you'd want to raise a glass with.

A few days after the concert, I joined John at one of his favourite Toronto pubs, Fionn MacCool's. When I arrived, he was into his first Guinness. We had lots to catch up on.



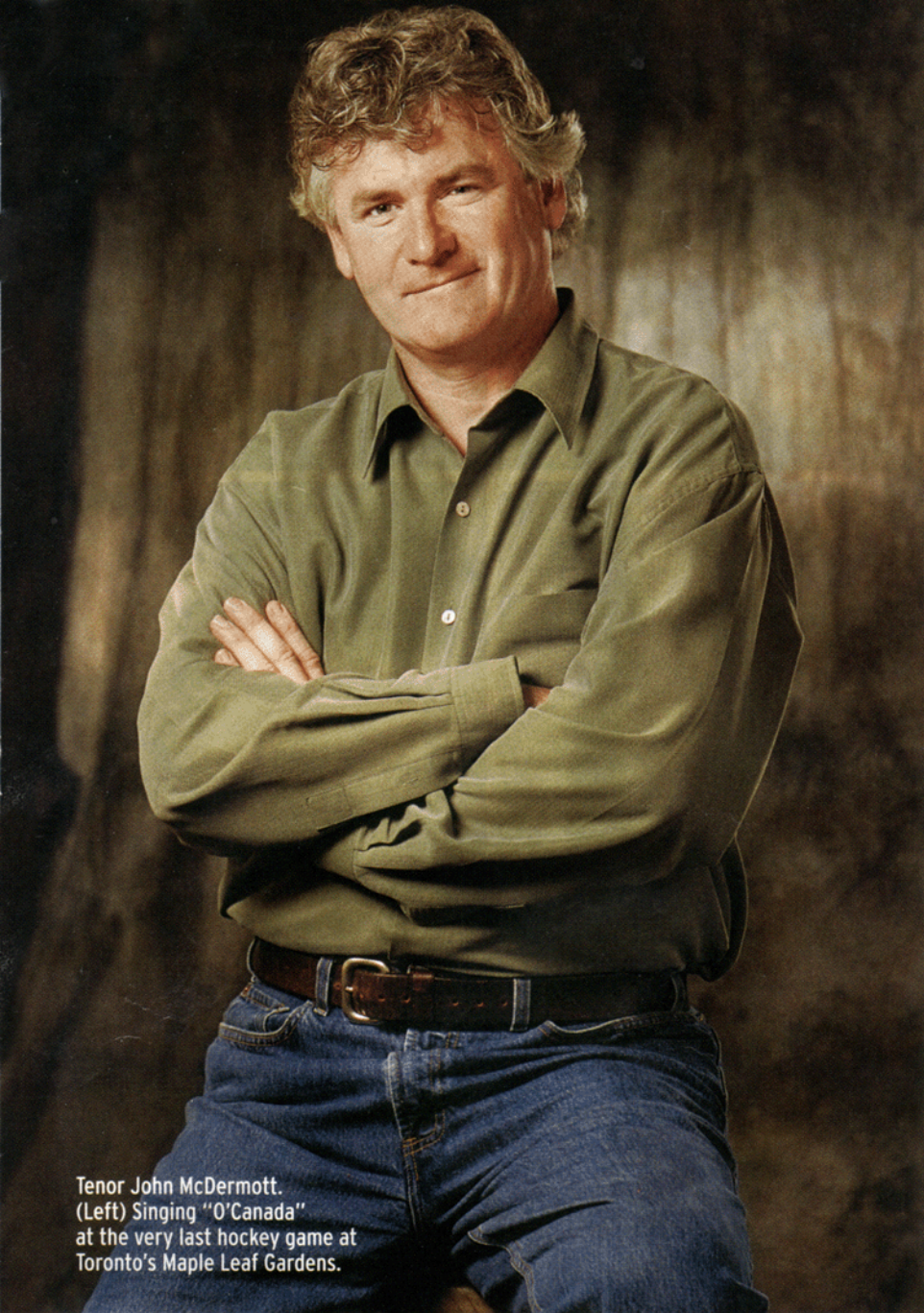
## Perfect timing

We started, of course, with how his career has skyrocketed and how he has become a household name. "I never thought I would get into this," he says. "It was a complete fluke, it really was."

For 10 years, John worked in the circulation department of the *Toronto Sun*. Then in 1992, he was invited to perform at *The Sun's* Floating Film Festival boat cruise. The song he chose was – you guessed it – "Danny Boy." And as luck would have it, mega promoters Michael Cohl (The Rolling Stones) and Bill Ballard were on board. Cohl told McDermott, "Call me when you go pro." And Ballard

Photography, Courtesy of John McDermott





Tenor John McDermott.  
(Left) Singing "O'Canada"  
at the very last hockey game at  
Toronto's Maple Leaf Gardens.

said, "I'll manage you."

In November of that year, when John called "Billy" to tell him he'd quit his job to make music, Ballard's response was, "Are you out of your mind?" But Ballard didn't discourage him. John had produced a CD for his parent's 50th anniversary, and Ballard and Cohl sent a copy to record company EMI. The CD had already sold more than 50,000 copies, so Ballard knew John had a chance at success.

John's timing was perfect. There was a big Celtic revival happening in the early '90s, with Rita McNeil, The Rankins and other East Coast Celtic bands gaining renown. McDermott's

music fit right in. Cohl and Ballard set up McDermott's first tour, opening for The Chieftan's.

After that, John did his own cross-Canada tour. His fiddler was the infamous Ashley MacIsaac, only 17 years old; even then John thought he was "absolutely brilliant." After the tour, The Chieftan's stole MacIsaac, so McDermott hired another young up-and-comer, Natalie McMaster. He continues to support young talent.

In 1993, *The Danny Boy Collection* went on to sell a million copies. With Cohl and Ballard at the reigns, McDermott says, "it just got better and better. The education I got from them, you just can't buy."

## Family ties

McDermott, 50, is as passionate (if not more passionate) about his family as he is about his music. Born in Glasgow of Irish parents, his family moved to Canada in 1965. Raised a Catholic, he grew up surrounded by music, attending St. Michael Choir School in Toronto. At home, everyone in his family sang, including his 11 sisters and brothers.

"All of them had pretty good voices," he says, "but they all decided to go into the trades or business." Each of the kids had their own special song, so John's anniversary gift to his parents was a CD with 13 songs – one from each of the kids, plus two renditions of John singing "Danny Boy" – his mom liked the accompanied version, his dad liked it a cappella.

John always believed his father, Peter, could have been a great performer – he had a phenomenal voice. And John's dad had a huge impact on his life, beyond music. For example, he taught John: "If you can put it off for tomorrow, it's probably so easy, you probably shouldn't." "If you have an opportunity to make things easier for people, just do it!" was another. But his mantra, says John, was: "Give someone the benefit of the doubt. People make mistakes, no one's perfect, especially you. So give someone the benefit of the doubt."

John's music also had a tremendous impact on his father's life. Peter was absolutely thrilled about his son's career, and John was pleased that his dad lived long enough to see his first sold-out performance, at Toronto's Royal Alexandra Theatre.

John was recording his album *Voyage* in 1995 when his dad died at age 95. At the funeral, Bill O'Connor, a friend of his dad's, brought a tape recording of Peter singing the "Last Rose of Summer." Friends had recorded it in a Glasgow pub in 1958



## profile

before Bill moved to Canada so he could play it when he was homesick – he could pour himself a Scotch, turn on the tape recorder and be back in his “local.”

John was overwhelmed. “At the time (of the recording), Dad was three or four years older than when I started, and it sounds like me! I could hear things in there that I want to do, but I can’t do yet.” John was so inspired by this song that he made it the last track on *Voyage* and dedicated the album to his dad.

McDermott also wrote a song about his father called “The Old Man.” He sang it at the Peterborough concert and it brought a hush over the crowd. The lyrics:

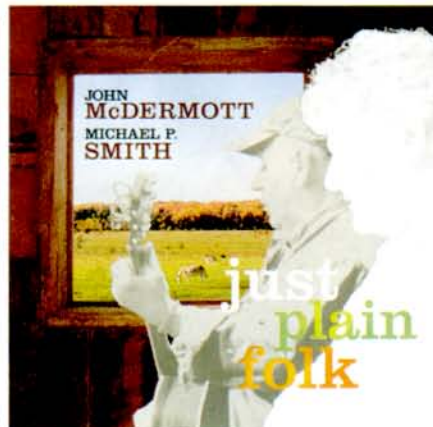
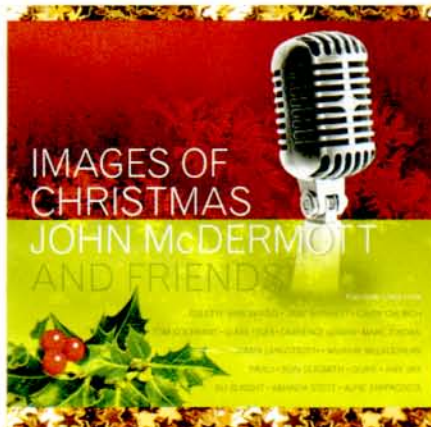
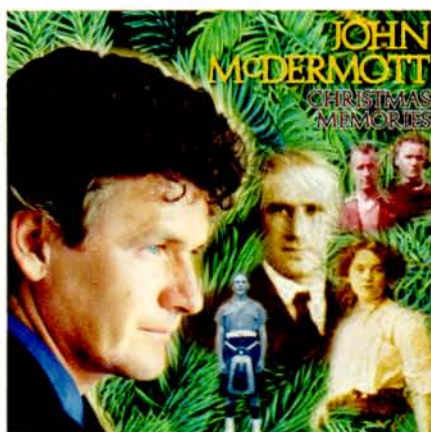
*I'll never forget him  
For he made me “what I am”  
Though he may be gone  
memories linger on  
And I miss him, the old man.*

His mother, Hope, had a spectacular voice, too. On one occasion, Peter Gzowski, then host of CBC Radio’s *Morningside*, invited John to bring his family along for an interview. “It was just one of those great shows,” John laughs. Gzowski was flabbergasted by the sight and sound of a roomful of wild McDermotts of all ages, everyone from John’s mother to some young nephews who grabbed at Peter’s leg and hid under the table. The highlight was when Gzowski asked Mrs. McDermott if she would sing. “She said sure, and sang a powerful ‘Silent Night’ that blew him away.

“My career was her lifeblood after Dad died,” says McDermott. “I got to spoil her in her later years – to help her do things she had never done but always wanted to do.” Hope McDermott died in 2000, and as if that weren’t traumatic enough, John also lost a brother and a sister that year – the toughest of his life.

## Amazing accomplishments

When you look over McDermott’s career of only a dozen years, it’s amazing to see how much he has accomplished: 12 full-length albums (that’s one a year); three Canadian



platinum (100,000) records; five Juno nominations (yes, he would like to win one); a heavy international touring schedule; the solo television special “A Time To Remember” which has aired on PBS and been released on DVD; and the PBS “The Irish Tenors” special that became a U.S. gold record. (John founded the Irish Tenors in 1998, but left two years later after his mother died. He has returned this year to join up with Anthony Kearns and Finbar Wright.) McDermott has also made countless appearances on such TV shows as *Good Morning America* and *The Today Show*.

No wonder John decided to take most of this past year off. Of course for McDermott, that didn’t mean just sitting around. In between 120 rounds of golf, he found time to produce three new albums, continue with his mentoring and philanthropic interests, and do a series of fall/winter tours with the Irish Tenors to launch their new CD, as well as touring to launch *Just Plain Folk* (with Michael P. Smith) and the new *Images of Christmas* CD (a recording of duets with an all-star cast of

Canadian singers and songwriters).

McDermott is hugely generous in his support of new Canadian talent. He has never forgotten the help he got from Cohl and Ballard. When John needed some step dancers and fiddlers for his TV special, “A Time to Remember,” he asked well-known East Coast musician Alistair MacGillivray whether he knew anyone. MacGillivray said, “Sure I do. My kids play and dance, and they have a couple of friends” who called themselves The Cottars.

McDermott was so impressed with The Cottars he invited them to go on tour with him, and his independent record label, Bunnygee, produced their album *Cottars on Fire*. John paid the production costs and told the group that when they paid him back, he would give them the master – the key lesson being that if you own your own master, you control the licensing and the revenue. That means not having to pay big-label recording companies \$9 or \$10 so you can sell your own CD during your concerts. Under his independent label, John only charged them \$1 for each CD, because that’s all he



says it costs to manufacture, package produce and distribute a CD.

The Cottars got the boost they needed when John called his friend Shelagh Rogers at CBC Radio and she had them on her program. The Cottars later won the 2003 East Coast Music Award for best new group of the year. They gave McDermott the award. In 2004, they won best group of the year.

## Christmas album

"I've never done an album that took me more than three days," McDermott boasts. That's because he believes that when you have a dream, "don't talk about it or think about it – just do it!" And that's just what happened with the new CD *Images of Christmas/John McDermott and Friends*.

Last June, John decided he wanted to do a new Christmas CD. His plan was to ask well known and lesser-known Canadian artists to write and/or perform their own Christmas song. Brigham Phillips would do the arranging and they would record all the songs live with an orchestra. A tall order on short notice!

Deane Cameron at EMI said he would back it, the musicians said "yes," and a month later everyone showed up in the studio. They were all floored to see the live orchestra, and John was over the top. "It was the coolest experience, and a very happy, fun mood," John says.

This magical 20-song CD conjures up images of sitting by the fire on Christmas Eve, sipping hot chocolate (or more likely, in McDermott's home, single malt scotch) while admiring the tree's twinkling lights and waiting for Santa. It features familiar songs like "Little Drummer Boy," "Huron Carol," and "What Child Is This," performed by Canadian artists Amy Sky, Marc Jordan, Tom Cochrane, Murray McLauchlan and Guido Basso, who plays a regal flugelhorn on the title track. *Images of Christmas* has both new renditions of classic carols and new compositions – songs like Jason Fowler's "Joy of Christmas," which could become a family favourite.

John loves Christmas. When he was a kid, he and some of his school-

mates at St. Michael Choir School were part of a group called The Mistletones, and they used to go carolling door to door. Now John and his wife, Agnieszka, have two Christmases: his wife's brother and family come over on Christmas Eve to go to church and celebrate a Polish Christmas (sometimes her parents come from Poland, but not this year). On Christmas Day, the couple goes to church and has dinner with John's side of the family at one of his brothers' or sisters' homes. And, of course, they all sing carols.

## Helping others

"Whatever time I've got, I'm dedicated to making things a little easier for others – and it doesn't have to be music," he says. McDermott's heart is as big as his voice – maybe even bigger. Life beyond music includes his passion to help homeless war veterans. McDermott House, a transitional home in Washington, D.C., helps veterans who want to get off the street. It was named after John as a tribute to the work he has done to honour veterans.

Veterans have always been special



to John and have been an important theme in his music. In 1999, he recorded an album called *Remembrance* in honour of veterans; it included such Second World War songs as "I'll Be Seeing You" and "We'll Meet Again." His concert tours to launch this album increased his profile in the U.S. "The veterans population has historically been ignored, outside of one day a year. So much of the music I sing really speaks to the veteran's experience and I feel a great deal of respect for the men and women who put their lives on the line for the sake of their country."

Another project, The Hope McDermott Day Program Center in Boston, which offers counselling and life skills training to homeless veterans, was named after John's mother. John also founded the Hope McDermott Fund, which supports projects like McDermott House in cities in Canada and the U.S.

In recognition of his commitment to veterans' causes, John received the U.S. Congressional Medal of Honor Society's "Bob Hope Award." In Canada, he supports the War Amps of Canada.

His next philanthropic project is to help bring to Toronto a Dore Achievement Centre for children with learning disabilities. John discovered the program when he stayed with its founder, Wynford Dore,

while performing at a fundraiser for Sisters of Mercy in Manchester, England. He says, "It's a revolutionary program that is non-invasive and drug-free, using physical exercise to stimulate the brain." John hopes to open the clinic in spring 2006.

My Aunt Mary is Irish and a big John McDermott fan, so in September we went to an Irish Tenors concert at Toronto's Massey Hall. They were touring to launch the new CD *Sacred*, on which McDermott teamed up again with Kearns and Wright. All three have very different, but powerful voices and when combined, they send shivers down your spine. "Kearns," says McDermott, "has the voice of three people." The three singers have great chemistry together, but there's no question that McDermott is the icebreaker. Aunt Mary told me the next day she couldn't sleep that night because the wonderful music kept playing in her head.

## Private life

McDermott's family is and always has been most important in his life. All the siblings live within a few kilometres of each other in Markham, Ont. At every performance, John places his mother's scarf and his father's cap on a stool off to the side of the stage. At the Irish Tenors concert, as he left the stage, I watched him gently brush his hand across the

## Talent McDermott wants you to meet

John McDermott is a supporter of developing talent. During our interview, he kept giving me names of up-and-comers – Canadian talent in to be proud of – that he wanted me to mention.

- Dawn Langstroth (daughter of Anne Murray). "She sings the best version I have heard of 'O Holy Night' on the Christmas CD. It was spectacular."
- Amanda Stott of Winnipeg: John predicts she'll be the next Céline Dion.
- Jason Fowler: A great guitarist, but also a great singer.
- Eileen Lavery of Saskatoon: She's a schoolteacher, singer and songwriter. She wrote "Corinthian" on the *Just Plain Folk* CD, which John recorded live at Toronto's Glen Gould Theatre and released this fall.

The CD is rich with the stories and traditional folk melodies that give meaning to McDermott's music.

"There's so much out there that are just lyrics, sadly. I like to pick songs that have a story," says John. "I love to talk about the song, and hopefully there's a message behind it."

cap and scarf – symbols of good memories, which he says he feeds off.

But he has chosen to keep his relationship with his wife, Agnieszka, very private. Married since 1985, they don't have children. John claims that's because he's never home long enough.

"She's a real trouper," says John (I think he means to put up with him). When it comes to music, she's a big Stones, U2, Zeppelin and Pink Floyd fan. The last concert she went to was the Rolling Stones, not the Irish Tenors. But she will be at John's Christmas concert at Massey Hall on December 22, for the launch of the CD *Images of Christmas/John McDermott and Friends*. And if you look closely at the CD, you'll see a special message: "Thank you to my lovely wife Agnieszka, always there for me." ■

For more information, go to: [www.johnmcdermott.com](http://www.johnmcdermott.com)



John McDermott and wife Agnieszka meet President Bill Clinton at the White House.